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# CONFLICTING REASONS AND FREEDOM OF THE WILL

NADINE ELZEIN

Incompatibilism is often accused of incoherence because it introduces randomness in support of freedom. I argue that the sort of randomness that's thought to be detrimental to freedom results not from denying causal determinism, so much as denying what we might call 'rational determinism': denying that agents' actions are determined by their reasons for acting. Compatibilists argue that introducing the ability to decide differently allows agents to make choices that are irrational, and this undermines rather than furthering freedom. I maintain that this argument neglects scenarios in which reasons are in conflict with one another. In such scenarios, we can preserve rationality without claiming that the agent's choices are rationally determined.

## I

*Introduction.* It is often argued that incompatibilism must be mistaken because it requires the introduction of *randomness* to support freedom. I want to ask exactly what is *meant* by 'randomness' and why this should be considered problematic. Randomness of any kind involves the denial of some sort of determinism. But there are at least two sorts of determinism we might be interested in.

The first sort—*causal determinism*—states that all events are determined by prior causes. Prior to the nineteenth century it was often argued that it would be absurd to deny that events are causally determined: this was taken to imply that there are 'uncaused' events, and this implication was considered intolerable.

Nowadays this in itself is *not* typically taken to be absurd: research into subatomic particles has cast doubt on the claim that causal conditions will always strictly *determine* outcomes. It may be that the laws of nature are probabilistic rather than deterministic; so whilst prior causal conditions seriously *limit* the range of possible outcomes, they do *not* strictly determine the outcome. And *this* the-

sis does *not* appear obviously absurd, and need not involve ‘uncaused’ events.

But often the denial of causal determinism is (at least partly) seen as problematic just because it is taken to imply randomness of quite a *different* sort: the sort we get when we deny that an agent’s choices and actions are *rationally* determined. It’s randomness of *this* kind I want to look at.

If an agent’s choices and actions are rationally determined, then they are determined not merely by prior causes, but by *reasons* to act. Whilst it’s certainly *possible* for any agent’s actions *not* to be determined by reasons, it is often argued that any such actions would be so deeply *irrational* that we would consider them insane, and hence we would *not* think that such actions were free.

It’s easy to see why causal indeterminism has been associated with rational indeterminism. If we adopt the popular assumption that reasons cause actions, then actions which are not *causally* determined cannot be rationally determined either. And if rational determinism is required for freedom, then the incompatibilist must be wrong to suppose that undetermined actions could be free.

Whilst I agree with the compatibilist that an agent cannot be acting freely if their choices are deeply irrational, I reject the following claim: that an agent’s choice could only be rational enough for the agent to count as free if it’s rationally *determined*.

Whilst numerous compatibilist philosophers appear to make some *implicit* assumption to this effect, arguments for this claim are explicitly offered by only a few theorists. Historically, this claim is explicitly defended by Collins (1717) and Hume (1740). And more recently, Susan Wolf (1980, 1990) offers detailed arguments to this effect.

## II

*Collins, Hume and Wolf.* Whilst each of these theorists is committed to the assumption that some sort of determining relation between reason and action is required for freedom, they differ in their analyses of *what* counts as a ‘reason’.

Collins argues that any ‘sensible’ agent’s actions are determined by a desire to bring about the most pleasure and least pain. He claims that any man who chooses misery over happiness has ‘lost

his senses', and hence would *not* be free (Collins 1717, p. 41).

Hume does not require that any rational agent must desire more pleasure and less pain, so long as they can act so as to further their desires, whatever these are. But nonetheless he notes that rational agents are very *predictable*, precisely because they always act so as to further their desires. He points out that the only agents who lack predictability are the insane, and that we would *not* normally attribute freedom to 'madmen' (Hume 1740, p. 260).

Susan Wolf's argument differs from both Hume's and Collins's: she requires not only that the agent can act so as to further her own subjective aims, but also that she is able to act in accordance with what is *objectively* valuable.

Furthermore, her account is asymmetric between praise and blame: if an agent *does* do the correct thing, then we already know she is *able* to. But in *that* case (unlike in cases of blame), she maintains that it would be absurd to require an ability to do otherwise, since this would involve the worthless capacity to do the *wrong* thing instead.

This would imply either that the agent can drop her well-informed values on a whim, and adopt misguided ones instead, or that she can act *in spite of* her values. Wolf contends that any agent who could do *either* of these things would be insane, and that insane agents cannot be free (Wolf 1980, 1990).

The differences between these theorists needn't matter: we can refute the claim that determinism of choices by reasons of *any* sort is required for sanity (and hence also for freedom) if we can find an example of an agent who would count as rational according to *all* of these criteria, consistent with being able to choose differently.

This must be an agent who performs a praiseworthy action, which both furthers his own desires, and reflects something objectively valuable, and aims to bring about his happiness and avoid misery, and where such an ability does not imply that the agent is 'unpredictable' in such a way that we might think he is mentally ill.

### III

*Conflicting Reasons.* But it seems to me that these cases are very easy to come by. This is because all of these arguments neglect an important feature of decision making: reasons for action can *con-*

*flict*. So sometimes there is equal reason to pursue two courses of action, but it is impossible for the agent to do *both*.

This might occur because there is no difference between the two courses of action under consideration. Scenarios of this sort are called ‘Buridan’s Ass’ cases, based on Buridan’s famous example of an ass standing equidistant between two identical bundles of hay.

Compatibilists often object to the use of Buridan’s Ass cases: the decisions in question are trivial, and such scenarios are incredibly rare, if not impossible. If rational determinism is taken to hold in all cases other than these, then incompatibilist freedom will begin to appear rather insignificant.

These criticisms seem fair. But ‘Buridan’s Ass’ cases are not the *only* scenarios in which agents might have conflicting reasons for action. Sometimes agents have good reasons to pursue two very *different* courses of action, and have no way to decide between them: this need not require that the options are *identical*, just that they are equally (or at least comparably) *valuable*.

Consider Sartre’s famous example of a student of his (who I will call Pierre) torn between going to England to join the Free French Forces and staying in France to care for his mother (Sartre 1946, p. 35).

Pierre’s case demonstrates that decisions of this nature need *not* be trivial. They needn’t be so rare either: conflicts of this kind basically occur whenever an agent has a *difficult* decision to make, even where it is not such an important one. This happens any time there exists a need to seriously deliberate about what to do. Whilst cases of that sort occur very frequently, the significance of this aspect of decision making is perhaps most strikingly apparent when we consider examples of decisions that are both difficult and important, where an agent may find it very hard to make up his mind, and may be inclined to *agonize* over his choice. Pierre’s case seems to be a scenario of precisely that sort.

But note that Pierre also seems to be perfectly sane and rational by the standards of each of the philosophers I mentioned above, even supposing he can choose either way.

It need not be true, as Collins argues, that Pierre has ‘lost his senses’ or that his alternative involves choosing misery over happiness. It may not be clear *which* of these two paths he should *expect* to make him most happy, and this may be precisely why he feels so torn.

Similarly, whilst Pierre’s decision will be unpredictable, he will

still act to further his desires, so this need *not*, as Hume supposes, be the sort of unpredictability we could only find in madmen.

And it need not be true, as Wolf contends, that Pierre's values are chosen arbitrarily, or that he can 'drop them on a whim' and adopt flawed values instead. Perhaps *none* of these conflicting values are misguided. They at least look perfectly intelligible. And whilst he certainly acts in spite of *some* of his values, this is only in order to further *other* values, and so once again, this needn't be freedom-undermining: he is perfectly rational since he would prefer to further *all* of them. It is just his predicament that rules this out.

#### IV

*The Denial of Determinism.* Whilst the requirement of sanity certainly demands that reasons *restrict* the agent's choices, then, it does *not* require that they *determine* those choices.

In fact, this seems to parallel quite closely the sort of thing that is commonly said to counter the accusation that any denial of causal determinism would be absurd: whilst it *would* be absurd to deny that causal conditions seriously *restrict* possible outcomes, we can preserve the notion of causation without needing to maintain that prior causal conditions always *determine* an outcome.

In a similar vein, so long as reasons *restrict* the agent's choices, we can preserve that agent's rationality. We need not maintain that reasons always *determine* actions.

The absurdity arises only on the flawed assumption that choices which are *not* rationally determined must be *impervious* to reasons. This is roughly equivalent to the assumption that any event that is not causally determined must be *impervious* to prior causal conditions, or that it must be 'uncaused'.

Whilst it *is* absurd to deny the relatively weak claim that agents' choices are causally and rationally *restricted*, then, my contention is that we can, at least in *some* scenarios, preserve an incompatibilist notion of freedom, without denying this. We need only deny the stronger claim that actions must be rationally and causally *determined*, and this does not seem so absurd.

## V

*Incompatibilist Freedom.* Whilst determinism (of either kind) would rule out freedom as the incompatibilist sees it, the idea that actions must be rationally and causally restricted merely limits the domain of incompatibilist freedom—it does *not* rule it out. I say that we should simply *accept* these limitations.

So, unlike most incompatibilists, I propose that we are *only* free in the incompatibilist's sense in cases of this kind. We could not have *this* sort of freedom more generally. But I think this is an improvement on traditional incompatibilism.

Compatibilists are right to argue that *where there is no reason* to do otherwise, it's absurd to require the *ability* to do otherwise; they are *wrong* to assume that this rules out incompatibilist freedom as opposed to merely restricting it.

If the alternative in question is not supported by reasons that are at least *comparably strong*, then I am willing to agree that the capacity to choose such an alternative *is* worthless: where one option is clearly best there is no need to exercise incompatibilist freedom. No effort of the will is needed to reach a decision. These are *easy* decisions. The only capacity we *need* in these cases *is* the weaker ability to do what we want.

But the compatibilist goes wrong in assuming that *all* cases are like this. In fact, the most *significant* decisions are the *difficult* ones: merely being able to do what we want does not settle anything in *these* scenarios because our *desires* themselves are in conflict. It is in *these* cases that I maintain incompatibilist freedom may be preserved.

## VI

*The Appeal of Incompatibilism.* Finally, I want to make some remarks about the respective appeal of compatibilist and incompatibilist accounts.

To many people incompatibilism seems intuitively very appealing: it is often claimed that our default position, before we think about it philosophically, is an incompatibilist one. But even if this is so, it does not seem to be the popular 'considered' opinion of philosophers. In fact, it's strikingly unpopular with great philosophers throughout history. So whilst our ordinary conception of freedom

*does* seem to require alternative possibilities, this requirement seems doubtful upon careful philosophical reflection.

I have tried to show that at least part of this doubt derives from worries about rationality of the sort I have been considering, and that these worries need not be as serious as has often been thought.

But I also maintain that the traditional compatibilist view does *not* seem to capture all of the important features of freedom as we usually conceive of it. It sometimes feels as if various possible futures are *genuinely* (not merely *counterfactually*) open to us, as things stand. This feeling is most striking when we are struggling to make a very difficult choice.

I suspect that compatibilism is popular, then, *not* because it plausibly captures our ordinary conception of freedom, but because the *incompatibilist* view looks incoherent upon serious reflection. And I think this is, at least in part, because traditional incompatibilism goes a step too far.

Whereas traditional incompatibilists have argued that free agents must have the capacity to decide differently in *every* situation, I maintain that this capacity only matters in *some* situations, but in many situations the traditional compatibilist picture *does* capture the sort of freedom that matters.

Classically, compatibilists have suggested that we have the freedom solely to *act* on the basis of our decisions, but *not* a capacity to *decide* differently. Our confusion, according to the compatibilist, is to think we can decide differently *as things stand*, when really we have just a *counterfactual* capacity, to act differently *if* we *want to*.

But it seems strange to suppose that when we take ourselves to be free in the incompatibilist's sense, we really *are* supposing that as things stand, we are *able* to or would even *want* the ability to decide to do things we presently have *no desire* to do. Where there is no obvious *value* to deciding differently, we are unlikely to be gripped by strong feelings that we are deciding freely in the incompatibilist's sense.

Rather, it *feels* as if we are free in the incompatibilist's sense when it is *not* obvious which path is most valuable, or which decision is best. It feels as if the future is genuinely, and not merely counterfactually, *open*, as things stand, when we are making very *hard* decisions, and we feel genuinely torn. It seems, then, that there is a lot to be gained by restricting incompatibilist freedom to scenarios of this sort.

Firstly, it seems that it's these scenarios involving conflicting reasons (and *not* the scenarios in which it is obvious what to do) that



drive our incompatibilist intuitions, and so if we can preserve incompatibilist freedom in scenarios of this sort, then we can do justice to those intuitions without committing ourselves to any absurdities.

Secondly, it seems as if restricting incompatibilist freedom to such scenarios respects the way in which reason should limit the range of actions a sane agent might choose, and so this strategy also allows us to respect the intuitive view that sanity is a condition of free will, and to do so without simply failing to capture important features of freedom as we ordinarily understand it.

So whilst the view I end up with does stress incompatibilist freedom, it does *not* insist we *always* have such freedom. Instead I propose that such freedom is both appealing and fairly unproblematic, but only if its presence is restricted to those scenarios in which this sort of ability really matters. And I have further tried to sketch out, at least roughly, what the distinctive features of such scenarios are. The weaker, conditional, ability emphasized by traditional compatibilists is not considered irrelevant on this view either: it captures the kind of ability that is important in other scenarios, where there is little value in choosing any alternative course of action. Neither of these abilities on their own then, can provide an exhaustive account of the sort of capacities that matter for freedom.<sup>1</sup>

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